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Commission on the Status of Women
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Item 3 (c) (i) and (ii) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women; women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly

Statement submitted by World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and Catholic Women, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The Thematic Issues (Items 1 and 2 of the provisional agenda):

At this, the forty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we wish to affirm that we fully support both thematic issues, which form a major part of the work undertaken by our organizations.

* E/CN.6/2003/1.

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We acknowledge those Governments who do provide grants to women's organizations, which enables women to be trained in the use of information and communication technologies.

While these issues are vitally important to the advancement and empowerment of women, it behooves us to recognize the very serious issues affecting the basic human rights of women and the girl child which can no longer be ignored by the international community.

We are concerned that the increased use of information and communication technologies such as the worldwide web, Internet chat rooms, computer and video games, DVDs and the media in particular has led to an increase in the debasement of women and children. The trafficking of women and girls (and boys) for the purposes of prostitution, pornography, sex tourism and paedophilia has flourished into a billion dollar e-business. The media and information and communication technologies, which should be used as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women and women's human rights, have in fact become essential tools in promoting violence against women and the girl child (and boys).

It is distressing to note that due to lack of education and to poverty, many families sell their young daughters to traffickers. These girls are then used for prostitution and for pornographic purposes. It is not a "human right" for men to subject women and young girls to this type of violence.

Therefore, we fully support the statement made at the International Conference, entitled "21st Century Slavery — The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings", which says: "The trafficking of women and children poisons human society and is an affront to fundamental values shared by all cultures and peoples, values rooted in the very nature of the human person".

In sub-Saharan Africa, between 500,000 and 1 million mothers suffer from obstetric fistula, which results in these women becoming complete outcasts from their families and society. Unfortunately, these mothers do not have access to the necessary ante-natal, birth or post-natal care which has virtually eradicated — regardless of maternal age — this condition in other countries. In 1987, the World Health Organization (WHO) held a "Safe Motherhood" Conference in Nairobi. While much has been achieved since then, unfortunately mothers suffering from obstetric fistula in sub-Saharan Africa have been ignored. These forgotten women experience unimaginable suffering. The rehabilitation of this condition requires psychological as well as medical treatment.

WHO has developed a Labour Pictograph, which is an excellent aid in helping with the early identification of complications of women in labour, but due to the lack of trained personnel to assist these mothers, they end up being stripped of their basic human right as enunciated in article 25, paragraph 2, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This states that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and protection assistance. One of the 12 critical areas of concern identified at the Beijing Conference for Women was the right of women to the "highest attainable standard of physical and mental health".

Apart from the lack of even primary school education for so many of these women and girls, they do not have access to a telephone so therefore have zero access to modern information and communication technology, which aids and abets their problems.

MaterCare International has set up a clinic in Ghana to treat mothers who suffer from obstetric fistula. It also plans to train traditional birth attendants in the use of the pictorial ante-natal card. These trained birth attendants will then be qualified to provide proper care for pregnant women in rural areas. Lack of funding prevents an extension of this vital work. Therefore, it is vital that more financial aid be provided for this work.

We believe that it is the responsibility of the United Nations, its agencies as well as non-governmental organizations to support an international advocacy role on behalf of women with obstetric fistula. This will enable the condition to be drawn to the attention of world communities in the same way as that of female circumcision (i.e., female genital mutilation) while recognizing that the education of both mothers and birth attendants is the first step in the prevention of this condition.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, violence against women was identified as one of the most pressing concerns of women worldwide. We believe the definition of violence against women and the girl child should now be expanded to include abortion.

There is currently much debate on the link between abortion and certain types of cancer in females. Conflicting evidence is being presented, but as long as the possibility of such linkage exists and until it is conclusively disproved, it is unacceptable for any agency, United Nations, or NGO to actively promote abortion in any of its forms.

Post-abortion grief has been recognized and accepted as a health problem in women who have aborted. Abortion forces a mother to use violent actions against her unborn child, which results in her becoming the mother of a dead child. As a result of her life experiences, Germaine Greer argues that abortion is a sign, not of liberation, but of oppression. Multiple abortions left her sterile and she suffers from other gynaecological health problems. How many other women have suffered the same fate? Women are now successfully suing abortionists for not providing them with information detailing the health risks associated with abortion.

Abortion provides an "out" for men and women to have sex without any responsibility or thought, either for the immediate termination of the life of their child or the future health risks to the woman.

In many countries girls are considered to be a burden upon families and of no value and thus become the prime target for abortion. Should the baby girl survive the nine months in the womb, upon birth she is then abandoned and left to die either in a gutter or rubbish dump. Abortion is a war against the unborn, and especially the "girl" baby. This is violence committed against future generations of females.

We must continue to express a vision for a violence-free world loudly and clearly. We must work to maintain a strong network of services by and for women who have survived violence. We must teach our daughters to expect equality for themselves and others. We must teach our sons to question sexism and reject violence, to learn the importance of controlling their impulses of immediate sexual gratification and thrills, and to respect women as equals.

Therefore, we call upon all Member States to:

- Legislate to ban the use of the World Wide Web, the Internet and video games, etc., as a means of sexually exploiting women and young girls (and boys).

- Introduce legislation to criminalize the acts of trafficking, pimping, brothel keeping and the procurement of women and girls for prostitution and pornographic purposes and to set jail terms befitting these abusive crimes.

- Provide support services for prostituted women and provide them with genuine economic alternatives for legitimate remuneration.

Further, we call upon the international community to:

- Assist agencies such as MaterCare International who are already working in sub-Saharan Africa, by providing increased aid so that more clinics can be set up for the rehabilitation of women suffering from obstetric fistula.

- Provide further funding for the training of more personnel as traditional birth assistants who will then be able to assist these women by providing ante-natal, birth and post-natal care.

We further call upon the United Nations, its agencies, all States Members and NGOs to work together for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and the girl child.